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OLD CHALLENGES AND NEW HORIZONS: RE-VISITING THE CONCEPT OF ERROR AND ERROR ANALYSIS IN TRANSLATOR TRAINING

1. Introduction

In translation pedagogy the concept of error has been an important concern for teachers, students and TS scholars (cf., among others, Pym 1992; Pisarska 2002; Hejwowski 2001, 2009; Paprocka 2005; Kim 2007), closely linked with translation assessment. Earlier works on translation assessment tended to concentrate on error analysis as has much of Polish translation criticism in general (cf. Brzozowski 2011: 8). In contrast to what has been considered negative evaluation, more recent approaches to translator training favor positive assessment, highlighting students' strengths rather than weaknesses. Some new assessment tools do not refer to translation as product, suggesting evaluating the translator's competence from a processual perspective e.g., by use of translation diaries or record sheets (Way 2008). Likewise, translator training tools used for eliciting feedback such as Gile's IPDR (2004) can be adapted as assessment instruments. Given these developments, has the concept of translation error become obsolete? Can it be discarded in the translation classroom? Reviewing selected concepts and categorizations of translation errors, this paper seeks to answer these questions. Further, it suggests an alternative to philosophical typologies, relating the concept of error to risk; it also redefines absolute and relative errors and demonstrates how error analysis based on such concepts can be used as a practical training tool in the translation classroom.

2. Definitions, norms, perspectives

Let us begin by asking what an error is. Hansen (2010: 385) straightforwardly notes that “[t]he term *error* usually means that something is wrong.” Reflecting an approach stressing the multifarious meanings of the term and definitional problems, an entry in the English Wikipedia states that “[t]he word ‘error’ entails different meanings and usages relative to how it is conceptually applied.” A much shorter entry in the Polish Wikipedia defines an error with more certainty as “carrying out an activity in an inappropriate way.”¹ This refers to a frequent understanding of an error as an unintentional breaking of rules and norms, which relates to the Latin meaning of the word ‘wandering’ or ‘straying’.

Yet what constitutes an error when it comes to translation? “If we define a translation as the production of a Target Text (TT) which is based on a Source Text (ST),” writes Hansen, “a translation error arises from the existence of a relationship between two texts” (2010: 385). Yet such a definitional preliminary does not seem to provide much insight as, in other words, it notes that a translation error is an error because of the existence of a translation (as a relationship between ST and TT). In her handbook for translator trainers, Kelly (2005) raises the issue of *translation error* yet does not provide any definition, asking readers to define the concept and specify its usefulness for teaching and assessing translation (2005: 131). This is meant to sensitize teachers of translation to the complexity of the very concept of error in translation and its pedagogical implications.

What is considered an error in translation depends on the evaluator’s conception of translation (cf. Newmark 1993: 128; Hansen 2010: 385–6), which can vary from subjective and commonly held beliefs in equivalence to sophisticated theories of translation. In equivalence-based approaches, an error in translation affects the equivalence between ST and TT leading to some non-equivalence. In functionalist approaches, e.g., in skopos theory, error in translation is “a non-fulfillment of the translation brief with respect to certain functional aspects” (Nord 2006: 17).

What also influences understanding of an error in translation and in particular its assessment is what I call the evaluator’s “translational standing.” This includes expectations and attitudes regarding translation ethics, loyalty, fidelity, adequacy and acceptability. The evaluator’s standing constitutes a dynamic web of individual and idiosyncratic norms and beliefs as well as cultural and societal norms regarding translation.

¹ Translations from texts other than in English are my own – J.D.-G.

3. Traditional error typologies

Numerous typologies have been developed, varying in purpose, criteria applied, text types, language combinations, and explicitness. As for their purpose, many of them are motivated by academic interest in contrastive linguistics, some are pedagogically-oriented whereas others have been devised to ensure quality of translation in commercial and business contexts. Since errors have textual representations and these are easiest to notice and investigate, most categorizations are product-oriented and limited to word and phrase level. Many of them follow predominantly philological and translational criteria of correctness and acceptability. Some are concerned with error gravity. Certain categorizations are based on the assumption that plausible hypotheses concerning the etiology of errors are possible (Hejwowski 2001, 2009).

An important distinction is made between translation errors and language errors (cf., among others, Delisle *et al.* 1999: 150). The first “could be narrowly defined as a case where a back translation or a segment of the translator’s version would indisputably produce a segment of text differing from the original segment” (Newmark 1993: 128). Newmark remains vague as to the meaning and scope of difference; it is rather uncommon for a translation not to differ from its source text at some level. A more specific definition notes that it is “any fault occurring in the target text, ascribable either to ignorance or to inadequate application of translation principles, translation rules or translation procedures” (Delisle *et al.* 1999: 189). This definition links translation errors with deficiencies in translator’s competence. In general, translation errors refer to and affect the desired relation between ST and TT. In this understanding, unintended linguistic mistakes in TT (e.g., grammar or spelling) would not be considered translation errors. Yet the translator producing a TT works under different constraints than the ST author. Interference of the ST language can lead to errors that would be unlikely to appear in a non-translation. For this reason some scholars question the bipolar division between translation and language errors (cf. Hejwowski 2009: 151) and postulate the term *errors in translation* or *translator’s errors*.

By way of example of a conventional approach, let us consider Sager’s (1983) classification of translation errors (1983) (quoted in Hatim and Mason 1997: 168):

- inversion of meaning;
- omission;
- addition;
- modification (unless justified by the translation brief).

This traditional typology is complemented with a classification of the effect of errors which, importantly, apart from linguistic and semantic aspects

considers also the pragmatic one, thus introducing the user dimension. In the pragmatic dimension the question is whether the intention is affected and in what way, seriously or negligibly.

4. Towards professionally oriented error classifications

Criticism of many error taxonomies concerns their philological and academic orientation (cf. Mayoral Asensio 2003b: 109), little regard for professional reality (cf. Byrne 2007: 2), focus on word and phrase level, frequently excessive complexity, preference for literary rather than pragmatic texts and demotivational effect on learners due to concentration on their weaknesses. It seems that translator training would benefit from applying, among others, more professionally oriented classifications which are pragmatically and functionally oriented, paying attention to such factors as cost-effectiveness and the quality of service provision.

Kussmaul (1995) proposes what he terms a professional translator's view, in which "error assessment is focused on the *communicative function* of the word, phrase or sentence in question. Distortion of meaning must be seen within the text as a whole and with regard to the translation assignment and the receptor of the translation" (1995: 128). Such errors can be considered functional and relative due to their dependence on a translation task at hand. An opposite category consists of absolute errors typically defined as "unjustified infringement[s] of the cultural or linguistic rules, or of the use of a given language" (Martínez Melis and Hurtado Albir 2001: 281). Such an understanding limits absolute errors to broadly defined linguistic errors and excludes the possibility of absolute translation errors. As Mayoral Asensio (2003b: 108) notes, only the stage of text comprehension "related to the perception of facts (dates, figures and names) – may produce errors in terms of a true/false dichotomy." These could be classified as absolute translation errors. It is worth noting that the label 'absolute' is to be applied only in a specific historical and situational context, as language and translational norms change with time.

At this point it is relevant to stress a considerable amount of fuzziness, subjectivity and complexity inherent in establishing and assessing errors in translation. In search for simplicity, Pym introduces a dichotomy of binary and non-binary errors. In this view, translation errors are non-binary which implies that there is no opposition between a correct and wrong answer but a choice is made between at least three options. As Pym (1992: 282) puts it "for binarism, there is only right and wrong; for non-binarism there are at least two right answers and then the wrong ones."

From a pedagogical perspective it would be desirable to attempt to provide whenever possible a clear distinction between relative and absolute errors. Per-

ceiving translation proper as part of a translation assignment, we propose such a dichotomy which defines absolute errors as such solutions which, without ambiguity and justification, transgress linguistic or/and translational norms or fail to meet requirements of a translation brief at a time of translation production and reception. For instance, unintended spelling mistakes (errors in product) or a failure to meet a deadline (error in service provision) constitute clear-cut cases of absolute errors. Relative errors are solutions whose acceptability is subject to discussion. For example the area of style allows for more flexibility than grammar.

The proposed distinction caters for diminishing ambiguity, yet is not concerned with error gravity. With the aim of professional orientation, we relate error gravity to risk. A major error involves faults in items of text segments qualified as high-risk. Such segments are crucial for a functioning of a text and also for a client to achieve his or her aim with a translation of the text. What is relevant here is the distinction between the categories of *high-risk* and *low-risk information* “depending on the risk of inaccuracies resulting in damage for the involved parties, for third parties or for the final recipient” (Mayoral Asensio 2003a: 19). In other words, major errors concern high risk information. For instance, in birth, marriage or death certificates personal names and descriptions of the documented events constitute high risk information whose correct rendition is of crucial importance. On the other hand names of certifying officers or form publication details bear little significance. The latter tend to be omitted in translation. The concept of risk is particularly useful for translation of official documents and other pragmatic text as it raises awareness of the consequences of errors both for clients/recipients/commissioner as well as for translators. Carelessly produced translations that require considerable editing or are returned on customers’ complaint can negatively influence the translator’s status and repute and undermine his or her professional standing and position on the market. The conceptualization of translator’s activity as risk management can also be useful at other stages of the translation production process (cf. Martin 2007).

5. Ups and downs of error analysis

An understanding of error in translation and its pedagogical implications correlate with the role and standing of translation classes in educational settings and developments in foreign language didactics. Originating as a technique of foreign language teaching in an educational context, translation was

used to test the mastery of foreign language syntax and lexis and there was an assumption of asymmetry and bidirectionality. [...] Consequently, the notion of er-

ror in translation was primarily interpreted as language error, characteristic of the various stages of foreign language acquisition (Pisarska 2002: 147).

In the early teaching of translation, error analysis was used as a traditional technique derived from foreign language pedagogy where it was particularly popular in the 1960s and 1970s due to the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (cf. Leonardi 2010: 41). Even in contemporary translator training and translation didactics, at least in the Polish setting, data still tend to “consist of corpora of examples of linguistically incorrect translations made usually in the course of translation into the foreign (rather than native) language” (Pisarska 2002: 147). In Pisarska’s view, most error typologies “reflect a greater or lesser degree of interference at syntactic, lexical and morphological level” (2002: 148).

For some time, error taxonomies were optimistically perceived – on the assumption that their improvement and standardization was possible. In the late 1990s, Hatim and Mason noted that “[i]n translation studies, there is general agreement that a single, manageable set of categories for the classification of errors, transparent in use and diagnostic in relating an inadequacy to a translation procedure which may be learned, would be highly desirable” (2005 [1997]: 168). In the 1990s Kiraly wrote that “[t]he relationship between the intuitive workspace and the conscious processing centre suggests that error analysis might be a significant teaching resource” (1995: 111).

Such optimism met recently with more skeptical stances to the development of universals in error categorizations. Assessments grids, now commonly used both in educational and professional contexts, are traditionally based on error taxonomies, where relative weight is attributed to a particular mistake type (minor or major). Yet the identification of error types as well as the identification of dimensions of translation competence is “pre-eminently subjective” (Eyckmans *et al.* 2009: 74). In Polish TS research, criticism has recently been directed at tracking errors in translation rather than appreciating translators’ work and their successful solutions (cf. Brzozowski 2011: 8). Influences of the communicative method in foreign language teaching with its focus on successful communication rather than correctness and belief in negative aspects of EA have lead to its growing unpopularity.

Recently, however, researchers of foreign language teaching have again begun to acknowledge that:

analyzing learner errors is not a negative enterprise: on the contrary, it is a key aspect of the process which takes us towards understanding interlanguage development and one which must be considered essential within a pedagogical framework (Granger 2002: 14).

6. EA as didactic tool in translator training

Traditionally, EA is believed to help translator trainers understand problems that occur during training (linguistic, textual, comprehension, production) and to indicate students' areas for improvement. Usually it consists of three stages: error finding, description and categorization (symptom analysis), investigating reasons for error occurrence (diagnosis) and undertaking remedial action (therapy) (Kusssmaul 1995: 5).

Effective use of error analysis as a didactic tool in the translation classroom should go beyond its traditional understanding of a systematic discussion of faults in students' translations with reference to TL norms and translation relationship between ST and TT. Apart from students' errors, also published translations, which are not always free of faults, can be a useful resource. Moreover, to show multidimensionality of translation, various error classifications can be applied. Finally, to enhance diversity, teaching a translation course should involve a variety of techniques, of which EA is one of many.

Error analysis also constitutes the basis of most translation assessment methods, both for formative and summative purposes. Such a state of affairs seems inadequate, especially for formative assessment. It involves excessive concentration on the translation product and follows the assumption that "the product is a fair indication of each of these skills [i.e., skills making up the translator's overall competence]" (Kelly 2005: 132). Criticizing traditional translation examinations Kelly notes that "error-based marking does not take into account positive aspects of students' work, which are grouped together as *non-errors*, usually with no impact on grades" (2005: 132). A simple solution with reference to assessment for formative purposes would be to introduce other techniques or instruments. In addition to traditional translation exercises these can include, for instance the following:²

Multiple-choice tests, questionnaires and interviews to check that the methodological and professional principles, the theoretical content, the extralinguistic knowledge and the psychological aptitudes have been assimilated.

Teacher's observation records, student's documentation (linguistic and extralinguistic) records, student self-assessment records, translation diaries (in which the student keeps a record of the problems encountered, errors, documentation sources used, time invested, global evaluation of the results) (Martínez Melis and Hurtado Albir 2001: 285).

² Translation assessment is a complex issue and going into detail would go beyond the scope of this paper. For an in-depth investigation of translation quality assessment see Dybiec-Gajer (2013).

In conclusion, effective use of EA in the translation classroom, apart from considering the usual aspects of the didactic setting, requires the consideration of the following factors:

- what the purpose of EA in a given didactic situation is;
- what is considered an error in translation;
- what error classification is going to be used;
- whose errors are to be analyzed and how.

7. Application of EA in LSP-translation classroom – a case study

Here I would like to present a scenario of a possible application of EA for translator training. The framework for error analysis is twofold, based on the concepts introduced earlier. On the one hand it consists of a division into major and minor errors (risk analysis) and on the other of a distinction between absolute and relative errors.

Level: intermediate to advanced

Aims: to sensitize students to professional aspects of translation;
to raise awareness of consequences of errors;
to improve skills of text analysis for both translation and revision stages;
to teach management of effort and resources;
to introduce the area of sworn translation.

Texts: grade transcript (the Ontario Grade Student Transcript, OST), both a ST and a TT?

Translation brief: as a sworn translator, you receive a translation of a Canadian document (the Ontario Grade Student Transcript) for certification. The translation is to be submitted to a Polish educational body for the purpose of recognition of qualifications gained in Canada.

Stages: ST text analysis – compilation of a virtual document;
comparison of ST and TT with respect to the virtual document;
identification and categorization of errors;
preparation of the final translation.

According to this scenario, students work on a source text and a ready translation. At first, they carry out text analysis with the aim to compile a virtual document on the basis of the ST. The virtual document (VD) (Mayoral Asensio 2003a: 30–1), or pragmatic dominant (Dybiec-Gajer 2012) consists of essential information necessary for the translated document to be accepted in the target culture. Therefore what is not included are elements “that are not linked to actual data, such as headings and unanswered alternatives along with instrumental

elements such as instructions and warnings” (Mayoral Asensio 2003a: 30). The virtual document is characterized by clarity and is easy to comprehend.

On the basis of a virtual document drafted for the text in question, students analyze the received authentic translation. It is relevant here that the students do not work on their own texts; this introduces more distance to the subject matter and they do not feel under pressure of having their work assessed (cf. Szczęsny 2008). With the help of the VD, students analyze the translation and mark elements to be corrected, categorizing them as major or minor errors. Importantly, students note down only absolute errors for this translation assignment. This is in line with Levy’s minimax strategy “which promises a maximum effect with a minimum effort” (Levy 1967: 1179). Likewise, the concept of risk in translation on which the major/minor dichotomy is based helps student to see the hierarchy of text segments and distribute their effort accordingly. It is high risk information that requires particular attention and the use of all necessary resources. Thus, students are taught skills useful in professional life. Bearing in mind the risk concept, future translators can learn to manage their effort and resources wisely to prepare for real life situations where time constraints and effectiveness play an important role.

In order to avoid negative, error tracking approach to translation, students are also encouraged to note especially apt solutions, again within the scope of the VD.

8. Conclusion

The concept of error in translation due to its multidimensionality remains an important issue in translator training. Despite a justified need for positive assessment, the existence of errors, regardless of their interpretation, is a fact of life and cannot be denied. Error analysis applied in a planned way and used in combination with other techniques can be useful in the translation classroom not only for traditional diagnostic or assessment purposes. Depending on the didactic setting, a teacher can customize this technique to suit the needs of a given learner group. To avoid excessive concentration on students’ weaknesses, existing authentic translations can be used as material for analysis. Approaching errors as a fact unavoidable even in professional translation and as a natural occurrence in the learning process can help students deal with their own errors. Using non-philological categorizations can help relate academic activities to practices of the professional world. Linking errors with risk as proposed not only sensitizes students to extralinguistic consequences, but also teaches them how to distribute their resources and effort while carrying out translation assignments.

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